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FM AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6960
INFO RUEHC/CENTRAL AMERICAN BASIN COLLECTIVE
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 5084

UNCLAS GUATEMALA 000147

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDED SIPDIS)

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/WHA, DS/ITA/WHA, WHA/CEN, INR
E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [GT](#) [KCRM](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#)

SUBJECT: GUATEMALA: ESCALATING VIOLENCE

REF: A. GUATEMALA SPOT REPORTS (2) 01/15/2009
[B. 08 GUATEMALA 00116](#)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Guatemala is experiencing a significant escalation in the level of violent crime throughout the country, including areas in close proximity of the Embassy and Embassy staff residences. In addition to a general increase in the frequency of street assaults and homicides, new weapons and tactics have been introduced in recent weeks, including the use of automatic rifles, the bombing of a public bus, and a grenade attack on a police substation. These attacks follow the record 2008 number of homicides, and a pattern of increased Mexican narcotrafficker activities. The violence is having an impact on Embassy operations; by septel we will request additional resources. END SUMMARY.

AK-47 ATTACKS:

¶2. (U) On February 16, 2009, at approximately 1430 hours and within nine blocks of the Embassy, the occupants of two vehicles reportedly began firing automatic weapons at each other. Three of the vehicle occupants involved and two pedestrians were injured by the gunfire. When the vehicles were later recovered by the National Civilian Police (PNC), they contained three AK-47 automatic rifles, a pistol and a bulletproof vest. PNC suspects the attack was narcotrafficking related; we concur.

¶3. (U) On February 3, 2009, at approximately 0545 hours and within eight blocks of the Embassy, two men on a motorcycle used an AK-47 automatic rifle to attack a public bus, wounding the driver and two passengers. The PNC was able to capture one suspect and search his house, locating a pistol, an AK-47, bulletproof vests (one with a PNC logo), and ammunition. Reportedly, the suspect was hired by the Mara Salvatrucha gang (MS-13) to attack buses that do not comply with extortion threats, and that he is routinely paid 300 Quetzals (approximately 40 USD) or simply food and clothing to carry out such attacks. Although attacks on buses are common in Guatemala, with 62 bus drivers murdered in 2008, the frequency of brazen daylight attacks in the proximity of the Embassy with collateral damage is rising sharply. Since January 1, 2009, the press reports 16 bus drivers have been murdered, a rate increase of over 50% from 2008.

BUS BOMBING:

¶4. (U) On February 10, 2009, at approximately 1000 hours and within 3 miles of the Embassy, a homemade bomb (containing tacks and nails as shrapnel) was detonated on a public bus, wounding four passengers. PNC captured one of two suspected bombers, a Guatemalan female who is reportedly associated

with MS-13. Attacks on buses using bombs have not occurred in recent memory and may signify a major shift in tactics on the part of extortionists. There is a huge potential of collateral damage if this tactic continues to be deployed.

GRENADE ATTACK ON POLICE SUBSTATION:

15. (U) On February 16, 2009, at approximately 1945 hours and within 10 miles of the Embassy, a fragmentation grenade was thrown from a moving vehicle at a police substation in San Jose Pinula, injuring two pedestrians. At 2100 hours, a call to this police substation threatened to continue attacks against all officers if the police did not immediately desist their policing activities.

ATTACKS ON USG PERSONNEL (REF. A):

16. (SBU) On January 15, 2009, at approximately 1715 hours, an Embassy Locally Employed Staff (LES) member was assaulted at gunpoint while in her vehicle, within 5 blocks of the Embassy and in close proximity of Embassy personnel residences. When the victim failed to comply with their demand for valuables, one of the two assailants struck the victim in the head with the butt of a pistol. The victim subsequently gave the assailant her cell phone and escaped with minor injuries.

17. (SBU) On January 14, 2009, at approximately 1730 hours, an American USG official was assaulted at gunpoint while in his car, within 10 blocks of the Embassy and in close proximity of Embassy personnel residences. When the victim failed to comply with the demand for valuables, one of the two assailants fired a semi-automatic pistol at him. Although the bullet entered the car, it narrowly missed the victim and he escaped physically unharmed.

EMBASSY RESPONSE:

18. (U) Embassy Guatemala has recently distributed Security Notices and Warden messages regarding the increased level of violence and street crime. Numerous Town Hall meetings have been held at Embassy facilities for all staff as well as throughout the country for AmCits. These Town Hall meetings covered general security precautions, recent criminal trends, guidance on what to do during an assault, and instructions to avoid all public buses.

19. (U) On February 2, 2009, Embassy Guatemala requested that the start date for the New Embassy Compound (NEC) construction be moved from 2019 to an earlier timeframe (REF. B). Embassy will submit by septel additional requests for resources to respond to the current and anticipated security environment.

110. (SBU) On February 18, 2009, the Ambassador will propose to the Minister of Government that the Embassy provide the PNC with the following equipment to increase security presence in the area of the Embassy and Embassy personnel residences: motorcycles for 24/7 patrol and rapid response, surveillance cameras to aid criminal investigations.

111. (U) Although Guatemala has numerous places of interest for Embassy personnel to visit for rest, recuperation, and recreation, the increased violence and perceived lawlessness is significantly limiting or outright eliminating options for US personnel to safely enjoy any time spent outside of their residence.

McFarland